

UC SANTA BARBARA

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UCSB theater students take on Orwell's 'Animal Farm,' a fable that still bites

In George Orwell's novella "Animal Farm," a band of neglected animals stage a coup against their cruel human owner, Mr. Jones. Buoyed by a shared dream of equality, dignity and peace, they develop their own commandments, they learn to read and write, food is abundant.

All is well. But not for long.

The animals' visionary leaders — a pair of cunning, smooth-talking boars — turn into power-hungry dictators and, ultimately, the farm is as dysfunctional and dystopian as it was under derelict farmer Jones.

So goes the 1945 allegory about the perils of unchecked power and privilege, the use of words as a political weapon, and revolutions that erode into regimes not unlike those they overthrew.

It turned out to be painfully prescient, noted Sara Rademacher, director of an [adaptation of "Animal Farm," from UC Santa Barbara's Department of Theater and Dance](#), running Friday, Feb. 20 through Sunday, Feb. 22, at Hatlen Theater on campus.

“The relevance of ‘Animal Farm’ today is uncomfortably obvious,” said Rademacher, an alum and accomplished theater director. “When I first read the play, I was struck by the overt changing of the ‘commandments’ or the rules of law established by the animals’ new society. Today, many people receive their news via social media and despite having a written and published historical record, what is written as truth one day can be completely denied, re-written or spun into something new and totally contradictory (but nonetheless just as powerful) the next. The parallels are uncanny and are strikingly unnerving.”

With a 16-person student cast, three student stage managers, two student lead designers and multiple student assistants, the play was first submitted for consideration by students, too.

“Out of the options from this committee, I felt the most drawn to ‘Animal Farm,’” Rademacher said. “I felt the students must be eager to work on something that engages with our current systems of power, and examine the idea of resistance. In addition to the undeniable ties to current affairs, I thought a show this epic, with such a familiar title and sweeping scope would be an exciting challenge that offered many opportunities.”

For fourth-year undergraduate student Yasmine Castaneda, the show’s costume designer, it was an opportunity to push herself in creative and challenging new ways.

“The animals in this play aren’t supposed to look like animals, but their animal identity is still heavily mentioned throughout the play,” Castaneda said. “This led me to think, ‘How can I incorporate silhouettes, details, clothing items that feel like the animal ... without it being heavy on the nose?’ There are little Easter eggs throughout the costumes that are subtle, but link back to their animal. Boxer is in a ponytail, Napoleon is in pigtails, Minty is in a wool sweater to represent his fur.

“I found different ways to incorporate their animal identity without having them wear ears, tails, or feathers. This is important because it makes the story and the characters more real for the audience.”

Similarly, she said, the play’s human characters needed “to read human” yet ultimately leave the audience seeing them as inhuman.

“A big word that Sara would use to describe these humans was ‘grotesque,’ which led me down a rabbit hole of research,” said Castaneda, whose reference material ranged from the Industrial Revolution to the painter Jean-François Millet. “The humans had to be scary, unsettling, deformed and unknown to the audience. Therefore, their silhouettes are exaggerated, the coloring of their clothes is unsettling, and I made these masks with really exaggerated features that made them look unnatural.”

“Layering and adding on costume pieces were also a part of my approach, because I wanted to feel like the clothes are changing with the characters as the play progresses,” she added. “It is through costume pieces that the audience comes to know that the environment and core ideals of the farm have changed.”

As adapted by Tatty Hennessy, the darkly comic new production is an “urgent, physical, ensemble-driven staging” that “has everything, and a lot of it,” said Rademacher. “It pulls no punches. There are battles, dances, music, intimate and heartbreaking scenes, humor...

“Besides being frustratingly relevant, I believe the play is thrilling, brilliant and entertaining,” she added. “Come for the music, the battles, the text, but stay for the community. And the hope.”

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